

**Ducks Unlimited Testimony on PA14**  
**May 9, 2006**  
**David Brakhage, Director of Conservation Programs**



Thank you Madame and Mr. Chairman and members of both Committees, for the opportunity to present testimony on the importance of coastal wetlands to waterfowl and Michigan residents and tourists. My name is David Brakhage, and I am employed by Ducks Unlimited as the Director of Conservation Programs in DU's Great Lakes/Atlantic Regional Office located in Ann Arbor. My responsibilities include overseeing DU's conservation programs in the five Great Lakes states of WI, IL, IN, OH and Michigan. In Michigan, we have 30,000 members in 185 chapters throughout the state.

DU is a wetlands conservation organization with a focus on implementing wetland conservation on the ground, versus a regulatory/advocacy organization. That means we protect wetlands and adjacent uplands through acquisition, donations and conservation easements, and restore wetlands by actually working on the landscape to return hydrology and productive vegetation. We also work to eliminate invasive plant species and provide technical assistance to landowners who want to productively manage their wetlands.

DU's first and preferred approach to wetlands conservation is through voluntary incentive-based solutions, such as providing funds and technical assistance. We also work with a wide array of partners; federal, state, local and private entities, to leverage resources and get more conservation on the ground. As an organization, we have a deep respect for private landowners and their property rights. Private landowners are one of our biggest partners, and DU has completed thousands of voluntary wetland conservation projects on private land in the Great Lakes watershed.

But we also recognize that wetlands, whether located on public or private land, provide important benefits to all of society, which is why we also support certain regulatory protections for wetlands. What one landowner can do to a wetland can have far-reaching impacts to all of society, and therefore regulatory protection for wetlands is warranted to maintain the benefits they provide to all.

Wetlands are important to fish and wildlife and, more importantly, to us humans. As more and more wetlands are lost and the benefits of wetlands become better defined, we gain a better understanding of the importance and contribution of wetlands to our health and well-being. We now know that wetlands are vital to healthy, clean drinking water, reducing sediment, filtering pollutants, recharging underground aquifers, and reducing flooding. And of course, wetlands are vital to many species of fish and wildlife, including 38 species of waterfowl in the Great Lakes basin. However, we have lost half of the wetlands we once had in Michigan along with all the values those wetlands once provided.

In some respects, coastal wetlands, which are the focus of this hearing, are even more precious. In part, this is true because they have been lost at an even higher rate than inland wetlands, and in part because of the critical role they play in maintaining the integrity of our Great Lakes. In Michigan, coastal wetlands provide essential habitats for waterfowl to nest and raise their young. These same wetlands provide resting and feeding habitat during spring and fall for the 3 million migrating waterfowl that pass through the Great Lakes region twice a year, each and every year. The vegetation of coastal wetlands is critical to waterfowl, because the vegetation fuels the

production of invertebrates that are a critical food resource. Marsh vegetation also provides escape cover from predators and shelter from wind and waves. Resurgence of coastal vegetation during periods of lower lake levels is part of the natural ecology of Great Lakes coastal marshes and is critical to the functioning of these systems. Coastal wetlands play a critical role in buffering the impacts of our industrial, urban, and agricultural development within Michigan. With declining abundance of coastal wetlands comes declining capacity for these wetlands to protect the Great Lakes water quality and to provide the habitat for fish and wildlife that is so important for our economy and quality of life. If we continue to lose coastal wetlands, at some point the remaining wetlands will not be sufficient to protect our lakes. We don't know exactly where the point of no return is, but many scientists feel we are perilously close to that point right now. We read with concern the recent research findings from Michigan State University and Grand Valley State University that described the impacts associated with beach and shoreline grooming. This activity not only has direct impacts in terms of loss to vegetation and invertebrates where it occurs, but also has impacts to adjacent areas and long term implications when root systems of these wetland plant communities are destroyed.

Just last month, another study pertaining to Great Lakes coastal marshes was released. This study was completed by Southwick Associates, a consulting firm that specializes in quantifying the economic contributions of natural resources. It focused on the economic values of Saginaw Bay coastal marshes. This study reported that the availability of Saginaw Bay coastal marshes for recreation alone had an annual value of \$15.9 million for area residents. Sixty percent of the general public residing in the Saginaw Bay watershed reported visiting the Saginaw Bay or coastal marshes for outdoor recreation. Seventy-nine percent of the general population felt water quality improvements from coastal marshes were very important. Residents of Saginaw Bay clearly value the coastal marshes not only for the recreational values of hunting, fishing, and various passive uses, but also for other difficult-to-measure intrinsic values. While the Southwick study was focused on recreational values, an extensive literature review from other scientific efforts to estimate the economic values of wetlands was also included. One comprehensive study reported that total ecosystem services derived from wetlands were valued at \$10,573 per acre per year. The study concluded that if Great Lakes coastal wetlands are not protected adequately, millions of more dollars will be needed to replace the ecological services provided by wetlands. The costs of additional waste water treatment facilities, erosion and flood control structures, fish hatcheries and other engineered solutions will be far greater than any money spent in advance to protect the wetlands that now provide these services naturally

Therefore, in response to our knowledge of the importance of coastal wetlands for fish and wildlife and the findings of the recent research on the negative impacts of beach/shoreline grooming, coupled with the economic importance of coastal wetlands to society, DU supports the recommendations of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality to allow the provision to sunset on schedule and to provide for a permitting process. We believe this provides a reasonable approach and compromise to providing private and public access, while maintaining protections for valuable coastal wetlands. Although the DEQ recommendations won't satisfy everyone on either side of this issue, we believe it accommodates all parties reasonably well.

Thank you again, Madame and Mr. Chairman, and the Committees for this opportunity.

*Ducks Unlimited Great Lakes/Atlantic Region, 331 Metty Dr. #4, Ann Arbor, MI 48103 734-623-2000*